

Indecent Assault On Sister's Best Friend

*The Family Group Meetings Project
explored the possibility of a face-to-face
meeting between victim and offender*

The initial referral was made in January. Robert, aged 14, had committed an indecent assault on Laura, his sister's best friend. At court, he was given a 12 month Referral Order. The local protocol indicated that in addition to an adolescent sex offender risk assessment (called an AIM Assessment), the Family Group Meetings (FGM) Project would explore the potential for a face-to-face meeting of those affected by the offence. The offence had occurred at Robert's house. The AIM (assessment) report, written by NSPCC workers, noted that Robert had no previous history of offending and saw the offence as occurring within the context of exploratory adolescent behaviour. Robert desisted from the behaviour once Laura became upset and had showed remorse towards her for the harm caused. Robert felt he had a 'boyfriend-girlfriend' relationship with Laura and the assault took place within that context. Laura was very upset and distraught by the offence and immediately told Francesca, Robert's mother, who told Robert off and calmed Laura. She asked Laura what she wanted to do and Laura said she wanted to forget it and not tell her mother. It was some weeks later that she disclosed the details of the offence to her father who immediately informed the police. Robert was arrested and charged. He co-operated with the investigation and made no attempt to deny the offence although there was some disagreement about the extent of the assault. The AIM assessment tool divides offenders into quadrants according to strengths and risk, and the team does not accept offenders with low strengths and a high risk of re-offending, because of the possibility of revictimisation. The AIM assessment showed Robert as having 'low to moderate' risk of further offending, with some strengths and resilience which boded well for ongoing work, despite poor social skills and special educational needs. Finally the report noted parental inconsistency in setting boundaries, exacerbated by the fact that Robert's care was shared between his father John and his mother Francesca, who had been living separately since Robert's early childhood.

Contact With Robert And His Family

The AIM Assessment was not completed until mid February, so the first visit to Robert and his parents by the FGM project took place in the first week of March at John's house. The meeting laid out the potential for an FGM and explored Robert's attitude to the offence and its

consequences. Robert was very quiet and shy, and easily overwhelmed by his very vocal and easily provoked mother. John stood quietly in the background and listened to what was said. Francesca felt strongly that Laura bore some responsibility for the offence and justified her decision that day, not to contact Laura's mother. Time was given to allow them to think about involvement in the process. Subsequent visits built rapport and a sense of trust with Robert, which enabled him to talk in his own words about what happened. From this it became clear that he was placed in the almost impossible position of accepting responsibility for the offence with the support of his father, but having to reconcile this with his mother's view, which placed far more responsibility on Laura and was very defensive in approach. In the end a Referral Order Panel date was set for April and Robert's father attended. Neither the victim nor her mother attended the meeting but Susan; a Victim Contact Worker employed by the Youth Offending Team, attended and gave a brief account of the victim's views. As part of the contract it was agreed that Robert would continue with the FGM process on a voluntary basis.

Contact With Laura And Her Family

The first contact was made with Laura and her mother Julie also during the first week in March. Laura appeared to have recovered from the initial trauma of the offence and although offered support from Social Services, had not felt in need of it. She 'wanted to put it behind her' and get on with her life. For her, the greatest repercussion of the offence had been the disrupted friendship with Paula, Robert's younger sister. The facilitators explained the FGM process and its voluntary nature, and emphasised their independence. Time was given for them to think through the potential and possibility of a meeting. Two weeks later a follow-up visit was made, and both Laura and her mother expressed an interest in following the process further. We began to explore the points they both wanted to raise and the questions they wanted to ask. It was agreed that Laura's father, who was estranged from the family, would not be involved, mainly because of Laura's mother's feelings. After two further visits a summary of points and questions was drawn up. Finally everyone agreed on a set of ground rules for the meeting.

Preparations for the FGM

After the Referral Order Panel meeting, we were able to focus the FGM on the benefit of communication between the 'two sides'. This identified exploration of the aftermath of the offence from both perspectives, looking at questions about motives and the impact of the offence on Paula's and Laura's friendship. (This had continued but was under tremendous pressure). The facilitators emphasised the 'future focus' of the meeting and ground rules to enable respectful and effective communication. I was very keen to involve Francesca, as she was a major 'opinion former' within her family, and her views were largely based upon her own view of how she would respond if she were in Laura's mother's place. Francesca's volatility and unwillingness to move from her fixed interpretations of the past made preparation very difficult. We had individual sessions with Robert and his father, since Francesca took over family sessions and spoke on behalf of Robert imposing her own confrontational views. We tried to work with her identified 'short fuse' and agreed a strategy with her to manage this during the meeting. But just before the meeting Francesca failed to be available for the ultimate visit. She phoned to cancel the meeting because Robert was scared of her reactions. A visit was made to Francesca on her own, and it was agreed that she wouldn't attend the meeting but a statement and series of questions would be presented on her behalf. All this raised Robert's fears, and these were addressed by re-emphasising the ground rules and making a strong commitment to his physical and emotional safety.

Professional Preparation

In addition to the discussions with the referrer (the Referral Order Coordinator) two meetings were held with Robert's Youth Offending Team Caseworker. She was on holiday on the day of the FGM but agreed to provide a report detailing her concerns and the resources available to the Youth Offending Team. Robert co-operated fully with the requirements of the Youth Offending Team and engaged with the NSPCC staff who were following the intervention plan outlined in the AIM assessment. The other important issue identified by the Youth Offending Team worker was the need to reintegrate Robert back into full time education. He had been out of school for two and a half years, despite being subject to a statement of special educational needs, and his family was very concerned. The offence further complicated attempts to get him back into school. Accordingly the Youth Offending Team worker referred him to the specialist Education Support Worker in the team, and also to a mentor to support

Robert in structuring his considerable free time more positively. The Education Worker was away for a week, and the victim and her mother agreed to delay the meeting. The Education Worker (who had previously attended another FGM) was prepared by phone but we held a face-to-face meeting with the mentor to explain the process and the ground rules. In total it took from March to June to complete the preparation, about 35 hours work.

The meeting

The meeting was held on a Saturday morning. The venue was originally a local community centre – however, the week's delay meant we had to rearrange the venue and use the local victim support office.

Participants

- Laura, victim of offence
- Julie, mother of Laura
- Robert, young man who committed the offence
- John, father of Robert
- Dave, Youth Offending Team Education Worker
- Steve, Robert's mentor
- Two facilitators
- Apologies from Pauline, Robert's Youth Offending Team worker who was on leave.

Structure of the meeting

It was agreed to stick to the usual 4-part structure of a Family Group Meeting, that is:

1. Victim–offender dialogue
2. Youth Offending Team concerns
3. Private planning time for the family
4. Recall to approve plan

However a number of changes were needed to make the meeting more applicable to the specific circumstances of this case, these were:

- The victim–offender dialogue was broadened out to consider who had been affected by the

offence and how, the questions this had raised for them and their wishes for the future. We also recognised that the usual requirement of a detailed account of the offence might be difficult for the victim and her mother to hear in the company of others. Respecting this wish for sensitivity presents the danger of ‘glossing’ over the offence and thereby excusing the behaviour. We decided therefore to focus upon the effects and impact of the offence rather than the mechanical detail of what did what.

- It was also important to maintain a strong future focus as all participants cited a desire for things to be better in the future as a key motive for involvement in the process. To achieve this, the questions from the facilitators were framed in four temporal frames, ‘How was it at the time?’, ‘How has it been since?’, ‘How is it now?’ and ‘How do you want it to be?’
- We agreed in preparation with all participants that we would only refer to people by name and avoid damaging short-hand labels such as victim and offender; although participants did talk about the offence which occurred.
- We supported the participants in speaking with their voice about their story. They are the experts in their own lives and have the potential to ‘re-story’ their futures and to be surprised by hearing the realities of others.

How the meeting went

The meeting began with thanking the participants for being present, as their very presence at the meeting was indicative of a desire and willingness to listen to others, as well as having their story heard. The ground rules were stressed in a positive way. This was particularly important in view of the concern about anger of others expressed by Robert’s family. At the end of the meeting, the facilitators commented that difficult issues had been voiced in a way which showed that anger was not the only means of reacting to the offence. This was a very powerful message for Robert, especially as his father John had been able to explore his and others’ emotional reactions without raising his voice or losing his cool. Both Laura and Julie were able to make powerful statements about the impact of the offence, within the four temporal frameworks, and identified their wants for the future. Laura wanted to be able to resume her friendship with Robert’s sister Paula, and also wanted to feel safe when she inevitably encountered Robert in the community or at Paula’s home. In response, Robert was able to articulate who had been affected by the offence and how. His first thoughts were about the impact on himself and his family, but with further reflection was able to realise and recount the effect on Laura and Julie. He voiced a quiet and powerful direct apology to Laura and Julie, which they acknowledged and received. Moreover he was able to say directly to

Laura that she would be safe in his company. The meeting also created an action plan for Robert. Whilst much of the professional input related to support for Robert, this balance was redressed by John, who said at the end of the meeting, ‘We have heard a lot to do with Robert in this meeting but I would like to ask something about Laura.....’ . He went on to enquire about Laura receiving help and support for the effects of the offence and expressed a concern that this should be available. Julie quietly thanked him for asking the question.